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Girls on Forms: Apprenticing Young Women in Seventeenth-Century London

Laura Gowing

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On 2 November 1681, at the Drapers' Company Hall in Throgmorton Street, Mary Harrison, a clerk's daughter from the Isle of Wight, signed indentures to bind herself as an apprentice. She was to spend seven years "learning the art" from a widow, Elizabeth Chapman. Seven years later, her term of service completed, Harrison became a member of the Drapers' Company and brought her indenture to the City chamberlain to request admission to the Freedom of London, entitling her to trade within the City and take her own apprentices.

Girls were a tiny minority of London apprentices: Mary Harrison was one of only six girls amongst the 102 drapers' apprentices in 1681, and the only one to eventually gain the freedom. But she was indentured in almost exactly the same way as her male peers, on a small pre-printed form with blanks for names, places, and dates. The words of the indenture changed little over centuries, across print and manuscript forms. Its subject was universally male. So when Harrison came to be indentured, the Drapers' clerk adapted it to suit her and her mistress (figure 1). On the indenture that was archived by the chamberlain, we can see each "he" transformed with pen and ink into "she," each "his" made into "hir," and the word "Master" changed to "Mistris" (figure 2).

<insert figure 1 here> Figure 1 Caption: Figure 1: Indenture of Mary Harrison to Elizabeth Chapman, 1681. COL/CHD/FR/02/16/26, London Metropolitan Archives.

<insert figure 2 here> Figure 2 Caption: Figure 2: Detail of Mary Harrison's adapted indenture. COL/CHD/FR/02/16/26, London Metropolitan Archives.

The practice of fitting girls onto forms made for boys sheds an oblique light on gender, work, and participation at a moment of some significance for women in the urban workplace. Like other printed documents and material objects, the standard form of the

apprenticeship indenture was given life by the social relations that surrounded it: the bonds of family, workplace, company, and City.¹ It was used, altered, passed back and forth, and archived. Originally a manuscript document, and still used in manuscript form in most of the country, the pre-printed indenture used in London from the sixteenth century onward was part of an expanding print culture of proofs and identifications, which helped to pin down a person's place and entitlements.²

Apprenticeship indentures were one of the defining objects of male youth in the early modern city; how their terms fitted girls and women is worth examining further. While indentures of apprenticeship were private contracts, they had a public meaning by virtue of the part companies played in city government and the basis freedom provided for urban citizenship. However, the promise of political citizenship was sharply circumscribed. While a properly completed apprenticeship enabled a male apprentice to first become free of his company, and then to apply for freedom of the City, for women the meanings of the freedom did not include citizenship's political entitlements.³ Coverture, particularly stringent in early modern England, constrained married women's ability to keep the freedom they had gained

¹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2007), 75–6; Helen Smith, “Grossly Material Things”: *Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2012), 9.

² Valentin Groebner, “Describing the Person, Reading the Signs in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe: Identity Papers, Vested Figures, and the Limits of Identification, 1400–1600,” in *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. Jane Caplan and John Torpey (Princeton, 2001), 15–27.

³ The political meanings of citizenship are explored in Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005).

while single.⁴ Women's relationship with company and city drew, too, on custom. The "custom of London" made specific reference to the disabilities marriage imposed on women workers, and sometimes offered remedies. A body of customary privileges, it was recorded in writing as well as memory, as befitted a transient population: when women did business in the City, they entered a new world of benefits and constraints.

Girls as Apprentices

Indentures like those of Mary Harrison register the small influx of young women into the late seventeenth-century London companies, a new phase in the long history of women's participation in guilds, and in women's work in the City more generally.⁵ They survive,

⁴ On coverture in England, see Amy Louise Erickson, "Coverture and Capitalism," *History Workshop Journal* 59 (Spring 2005): 1–16.

⁵ The precedents and subsequent developments are discussed in Stephanie R. Hovland, "Girls as Apprentices in Later Medieval London," in *London and the Kingdom: Essays in Honour of Caroline M. Barron*, ed. Matthew Davies and Andrew Prescott (Donington, 2008), 179–94; Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620* (Cambridge, 2005); Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, "Women Apprentices in the Trade and Crafts of Early Modern Bristol," *Continuity and Change* 6, no. 2 (August 1991): 227–252; Keith Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge, 1987), chap. 6; Joan Lane, *Apprenticeship in England, 1600–1914* (London, 1996); Deborah Simonton, "Apprenticeship: Training and Gender in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Markets and Manufacture in Early Industrial Europe*, ed. Maxine Berg (London, 1991). For a European parallel see Danielle van der Heuvel, "Guilds, Gender Policies and Economic Opportunities for Women in Early Modern Dutch Towns," in *Female*

preserved by the chamberlain's office, only for those girls who eventually became free, though company registers provide a better sense of the numbers. The proportion of female apprentices in the post-medieval guilds has been consistently estimated as at most 1% or 2% of the total, but a closer scrutiny of the figures reveals some marked changes in the seventeenth century. In the first half of the seventeenth century, very few companies seem to have apprenticed any girls at all; the registers of the Clothworkers before 1640, for example, record eleven girls amongst nine and a half thousand boys. From 1645, directly following on the familial and economic disruptions of the civil wars, a change is apparent in some companies. The Clothworkers' Company recorded two female apprentices in 1646 and three in 1647.⁶ The Mercers and the Tallowchandlers followed. The Founders started taking girls much later, in the 1680s. Across nine London companies whose records have been digitised, forty-four girls were apprenticed in the 1650s, seventy-five in the 1670s, and one hundred in the 1690s. As the numbers of apprenticeships fell through the eighteenth century, the proportions of girls amongst them remained steady until the 1770s.⁷

Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640–1830, ed. Anne Montenach and Deborah Simonton (New York, 2013), 116–33.

⁶ The Clothworkers' apprentices are discussed in Jessica Collins, "Jane Holt, Milliner, and Other Women in Business: Apprentices, Freewomen and Mistresses in The Clothworkers' Company, 1606–1800," *Textile History* 44, no. 1 (May 2013): 72–94.

⁷ "Bowyers', Clothworkers', Drapers', Founders', Girdlers', Goldsmiths', Mercers', Salters', and Tallow Chandlers' Companies" *Records of London's Livery Companies Online*, <http://www.londonroll.org>, accessed 4 April 2015. See also the data in Amy Louise Erickson, "Married Women's Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London," *Continuity and Change* 23, no. 2 (August 2008): 267–307.

Apprenticed girls remained exceptional in their peer group, amongst working women, and in the companies. The corporate system of early modern Europe was self-consciously male and exclusive of women, and guilds have traditionally been given a key role in undermining women's skilled work.⁸ By the late seventeenth century, as guilds' place in city economies became less certain, this story no longer seems to hold. Alice Clark found copious, but fragmentary, evidence of women's participation in seventeenth-century guilds.⁹ More recently, Clare Haru Crowston has described the operation of independent women's guilds in France, and S.D. Smith has shown the York Merchant Tailors' Company actively deciding to recruit women in the early eighteenth century, creating a guild in which nearly half the new apprentices were female.¹⁰ In that light, the changes in London from the 1640s onward look minimal. But they suggest some interesting shifts. Changes in the guilds themselves may have opened a small space for women. As the city expanded far beyond its walls, fewer and fewer Londoners were subject to company regulation—nor was the proportion of men who were freemen and citizens sufficient by the later seventeenth century

⁸ Merry E. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (Brunswick, 1986).

⁹ Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Amy Louise Erickson (London, 1992.) Recent findings across Europe are explored in Clare Crowston, "Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research," *International Review of Social History* 53, Supplement S16 (December 2008): 19–44.

¹⁰ Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women : The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675–1791* (Durham, NC, 2001); S. D. Smith, "Women's Admission to Guilds in Early-Modern England: The Case of the York Merchant Tailors' Company, 1693–1776," *Gender & History* 17, no. 1 (April. 2005): 99–126. See also Mary Prior, "Women and the Urban Economy: Oxford 1500–1800," in *Women in English Society 1500–1800* ed. Mary Prior (Oxford, 1985), 93–117.

to maintain the traditional place of company membership in urban politics. Alongside these changes came an increased interest in the education and training of middling sort girls, registered for example in educational and commercial treatises. Evidence from London and other urban communities suggests an expansion in the opportunities for single women's independent work. Most specifically, the more flexibly tailored fashions of the late seventeenth century helped fuel an increase in women's work as seamstresses, milliners and associated occupations.¹¹ Only a small proportion of women's work took place within the purview of the guilds. But their role in defining who could practice crafts and trades in cities and towns, their historic significance as institutions that united occupational and political status, and their continuing role in sociability and politics gave them ideological weight as well as practical power.¹²

¹¹ Pamela Sharpe, "Dealing with Love: The Ambiguous Independence of the Single Woman in Early Modern England," *Gender & History* 11, no. 2 (July 1999): 209–32, "Lace and Place: Women's Business in Occupational Communities in England 1550–1950," *Women's History Review* 19, no. 2 (April 2010): 283–306, and more generally *Women's Work: The English Experience, 1650–1914* (London, 1998); Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, 1996); Amy M. Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005).

¹² On the changing role of guilds, see Mark S. R. Jenner, "Guildwork," in *Guilds, Society & Economy in London 1450–1800*, ed. Patrick Wallis and Ian Gadd (London, 2002), 163–70, and Michael Berlin, "Guilds in Decline? London Livery Companies and the Rise of a Liberal Economy, 1600–1800," in *Guilds, Innovation, and the European Economy, 1400–1800*, ed. S. R. Epstein and Maarten Prak (Cambridge, 2008), 316–42.

Indentures offer an unlikely starting point for one of the stories of women's work in the midst of economic transformation. In all the debates about the history of women's work in the pre-modern period, one consensus stands: it is poorly recorded. Institutional records defined women as outside the structure of occupations. Piecework, caring, body work, and married women's contributions to a household economy were, and are, hard to count. The language and regulations of guilds reinforced a model of female dependency on male artisan labor. Other records, though, provide evidence of women's occupational identities, their capacity to earn, and the significance of their labor in the household or personal economy. Recent historians have made particularly productive use of legal records, which offer both incidental mentions of work in passing and detailed answers to a general question to witnesses about how they lived.¹³ In late seventeenth-century London, a large majority of married women answering this question identified themselves by an occupation different to that of their husbands.¹⁴ Sewing featured heavily, accounting for over a fifth of married women in early modern London records: they described embroidery, mending, making caps, gloves, stays, or periwigs. Other London occupations involved nursing, retail, victualling, and textile manufacture. The variety of urban work sharply differentiated it from the majority of

¹³ Peter Earle, "The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Economic History Review* 42, no. 3 (August 1989): 328–53; Erickson, "Married Women's Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London"; Eleanor Hubbard, *City Women: Money, Sex, and the Social Order in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 2012); Alexandra Shepard, "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy," *History Workshop Journal* 78 (Autumn 2015): 1–24.

¹⁴ Earle, "The Female Labour Market."

the occupations ascribed to rural women, which typically fell into the category of textile production rather than making or selling clothes.¹⁵

The dominance of sewing was reflected still further in the records of women in guilds. Apprenticeship records rarely reveal much about the real work of boys, girls, men, or women. Girls were trained by mistresses, but apprenticed, usually, to the mistress's husband, and in his company. The customs of London allowed married women to bind their own apprentices in "certain crafts," but by the late seventeenth century few if any seem to have done so.¹⁶ The company to which a master belonged might not represent his craft, and was most unlikely to represent his wife's work. In this sense apprenticed girls took part in a kind of fiction of participation, present for many apprentices but more extreme for them, because most of the crafts they learned did not have guilds of their own. Much of the piecemeal evidence for what girls were doing in apprenticeships involves the needle: millinery, making garments such as coats, or sewing. Seamstry was traditionally confined to making smocks and outer garments (cuffs, bands, ruffs, sleeves, and hoods), as opposed to male-tailored "body" garments, but by the 1680s, with the growth particularly of mantuas made by women, the opportunities for seamstresses were increasing.¹⁷ Alongside sewing work, other women were training as pastry cooks, periwig makers, and haberdashers. The need for formal apprenticeships is not always obvious; many other women were doing the same work without indentures. Other evidence

¹⁵ Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2015), 219–20. Craig Muldrew, "'Th'ancient Distaff' and 'whirling Spindle': Measuring the Contribution of Spinning to Household Earnings and the National Economy in England, 1550–1770," *Economic History Review* 65, no. 2 (May 2012): 498–526, notes the national significance of spinning in this period.

¹⁶ Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, 195.

¹⁷ Randall Holme, *The Academy of Armory*, book 3 (Chester, 1688), 95–6.

suggests that some women were “hindered” in their trades for not having the freedom, but so few women went on to become free that this can only be a partial explanation. Nor is there enough evidence to speculate on whether girls or their parents drove this choice. But for both, the formal inclusivity of apprenticeship, the capacity of companies and equity courts to offer redress of grievances, and the solid respectability of guilds may help explain the turn to apprenticeship.

The seamstresses of the later seventeenth century participated in some key shifts in the urban workplace. They were part of Jan de Vries’s “industrious revolution,” where household demands for new goods drove changes in type and location of work.¹⁸ Some of them sewed for and worked in the Royal Exchange, one of several shopping galleries made for walking and socialising as well as buying. The City’s attempts to encourage new business after the Fire of 1666 by suspending the requirement of citizenship must have helped, but the new pattern of female apprenticeship was first evident earlier than this, in the 1650s. It included girls like Mary Davy and Sara Eades, daughters of a husbandman and an apothecary respectively, who were apprenticed to clothworkers William and Elinor Knight in 1657; Hester and Ruth Sneade, orphaned daughters of a Bristol draper, who were apprenticed to London drapers in 1652; and Rebecca Shillatree, apprenticed to a goldsmith in 1659. Forty-three women were apprenticed in the 1650s to clothworkers, drapers, goldsmiths, mercers, and tallow chandlers; while this is still a small number, it is a considerable advance on the previous decade’s total of four.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jan De Vries, “The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution,” *Journal of Economic History* 54, no. 2 (June 1994): 249–70.

¹⁹ *Records of London’s Livery Companies Online*, [http:// www.londonroll.org](http://www.londonroll.org), accessed 4 April 2015. This is not a representative sample, but rather the companies whose records have been digitised.

Explanations for the increase in female apprenticeship at this point can only be speculative. Traditionally historians have been sceptical about the lasting impact of the political, religious, and military activism of women in the English Revolution—if anything there was a reaction against women claiming new roles.²⁰ It may be, though, that familial disruptions and dislocations helped open opportunities. Girls taking apprenticeships may represent initiatives both from young women and their families outside and inside London, and from companies relaxing their position on female participation.

The new female apprentices of the midcentury came in roughly equal proportions from London, the south-east, and elsewhere in England. Most of them were the children of craftsmen, some freemen themselves; a few, the beginning of a trend, had fathers described as gentlemen. A corresponding change is not apparent in the numbers of women taking on apprentices, since most girls were apprenticed to their mistresses' husbands. Widows sometimes took apprentices into their husbands' old trade, but this accounted for less than 2% of all apprentices, boys and girls. These numbers tell us very little about patterns of women's work, but they do register something about the relationship of women with the City of London and its companies: formal training and membership in the key civic institution were becoming a possibility.

The girls apprenticed in the later seventeenth century were part of a recognisable group, the daughters of the new middle class. Typical of migrants of their ages, they had often already lost at least their fathers, but they were unusual in that some at least paid substantial premiums of £10, £20, or even £50 to their masters and mistresses. In that sense, they are comparable with the genteel and middling women whose work Amy Erickson,

²⁰ Patricia Crawford, "The Challenges to Patriarchalism: How Did the Revolution Affect Women?" in *Revolution and Restoration: England in the 1650s*, ed. J. S. Morrill (London, 1992), 112–28; Ann Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution* (London, 2011).

Margaret Hunt, and Nicola Phillips have traced in eighteenth-century companies, businesses, and commercial households.²¹ Of the girls apprenticed in the 1680s and 1690s, around a third had fathers described as gentlemen or clerks. The figure was slightly higher for those few women who went on to take the freedom; perhaps gentility, and its resources, was an active encouragement to doing business. Over half the female apprentices had fathers who were crafts or tradesmen. Half of those fathers were themselves members of London companies, though almost none of the girls were apprenticed into their fathers' companies. All this is consistent with the pattern for male apprentices, suggesting that a small number of parents both in and out of London were fitting daughters into a model that was already well established for boys. In some cases, indeed, siblings were apprenticed consecutively, boys and girls to different masters. Where two sisters were apprenticed they tended to be put to the same master, and sometimes to an elder sister of their own. Mary Harrison, with whose indenture we began, eventually took her own sister Catherine on as an apprentice.²² Apart from the sibling connections, it is hard to trace the kind of significant networks between female apprentices and their masters and mistresses that Tim Leunig, Chris Minns, and Patrick Wallis found for their male peers.²³ This is not to say there were none; rather, many

²¹ Amy Louise Erickson, "Eleanor Mosley and Other Milliners in the City of London Companies 1700–1750," *History Workshop Journal* 71 (Spring 2011): 147–72; Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, 1996); Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700–1850* (Woodbridge, 2006). Evidence of premiums paid is patchy for this period.

²² "1689, Mary Harrison, Draper's Company". *Records of London's Livery Companies Online*, <http://www.londonroll.org>, accessed 18 December 2015.

²³ Calculations for boys' origins can be found in Christopher Brooks, "Apprenticeship, Social Mobility and the Middling Sort, 1550–1800," in *The Middling Sort of People*, ed.

of the networks of reference and obligation used by early modern people have become invisible, especially when they involved married women.

Agnes Blennerhassett, apprenticed into the Mercers' company in 1685, seems at first glance to have no obvious links to the man to whom she was indentured, John Spillett, or his wife Frances. Agnes's father was a Norfolk gentleman, merchant tailor, and lieutenant-colonel, buried as a Dissenter in Bunhill Fields. However, in his will he left money to "my niece and nephew Spillett": Frances Spillett turns out to have been a Blennerhassett by birth, and her apprentice Agnes was her cousin. The web of merchants involved countless such ties, the middling class's currency of credit, and apprenticeship, like service, played a part in it. Agnes Blennerhassett went on to take the freedom and six months later, in 1693, took up a lease of a shop at the Royal Exchange. Her master held a number of stalls in the Exchange in the 1690s, so she may have worked there earlier. Three years later she married a goldsmith from Essex with a shop on Cheapside and, as far as can be seen, gave up the Exchange.²⁴

Christopher Brooks and Jonathan Barry (London, 1994), 52–83 at 59, and Collins, "Jane Holt, Milliner," 77. Tim Leunig, Chris Minns, and Patrick Wallis, "Networks in the Premodern Economy: The Market for London Apprenticeships, 1600–1749," *Journal of Economic History* 71, no. 2 (June 2011): 413–43.

²⁴ COL/CHD/FR/02/62/12, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA); TNA, Prob 11/454; Jane Muncaster, "'Six Foote of Shop Roome': Women as Subjects in the Records of The Royal Exchange in the 1690s" (M.A. dissertation, Birkbeck College, 2003), 40; "England Marriages, 1538–1973," *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:NVPL-BY9>, accessed 5 February 2016; "Tallow-Chandlers' and Goldsmiths' registers," *Records of London's Livery Companies Online*, <http://www.londonroll.org>, accessed 18 December 2015.

To take up an apprenticeship did not necessarily set a girl on the same path as a boy apprenticed to a trade. But it did open up the possibility of trading freely in the city, often in the small shops of the Exchange. Around one in ten of the late seventeenth-century female apprentices completed their service, became free of their companies, and then took the freedom, enabling them to trade legally in their own names as long as they were single. Some of those went on to take apprentices of their own, passing their training on to another generation. This was highly variable by company, and even more so by household. The Mercers and the Drapers Companies had a surprisingly high proportion of female apprentices taking the freedom, around one in three, but this represented only eighteen apprentices and five mistresses.

Most girls, though, were apprenticed to women whose authority to train them came not from their own apprenticeships, but from marriage to a man who had gained the freedom through apprenticeship or patrimony. Even for men the traditional life cycle of apprentice to master was losing its grip. As many as half the male apprentices of this era did not complete their contracts, and women were even more likely to default. Patrick Wallis has argued convincingly that apprenticeship was a system whose flexibility made it functional, and this seems to be especially true for women, who might leave part-way through to work outside the city, lose a mistress when she was widowed and remarried away from the trade, or marry themselves.²⁵

Making Indentures

²⁵ Chris Minns and Patrick Wallis, "Rules and Reality: Quantifying the Practice of Apprenticeship in Early Modern England," *Economic History Review* 65, no. 2 (May 2012): 556–79; Patrick Wallis, "Labor, Law, and Training in Early Modern London: Apprenticeship and the City's Institutions," *Journal of British Studies* 51, no. 4 (October 2012): 791–819.

Every apprentice required a pair of indentures. Ostensibly the most formulaic of records, when indentures were used for women they had to be retailed, and the form these changes took helps document the exclusion and inclusion of women. In apprenticeship indentures, the ideology of the company met the material culture of occupational identity; both were heavily gendered. City rhetoric used loaded terms: “custom,” “freeman,” “secret.” Hilda Smith has argued that formal company language was moving in this period from clearly gendered terms such as “brothers and sisters” toward less gendered words like “freeman,” obscuring women’s exact place.²⁶ At a less formal level, the minute books and marginalia can reference the labor of women in copious ways, as Helen Smith has traced in the archives of the Stationers’ Company.²⁷ The question of women’s participation in guild work and its management was one of concern to many guilds, and for some, like the Weavers’ Company, regulating women became something of a touchstone for their own artisanal identity.²⁸ Guilds, companies, and freemen were at the heart of urban political culture in the seventeenth century, and whilst the proportions of enfranchised men decreased after 1640, and company privileges were manipulated by the later Stuarts for political reasons in the 1680s. The ideology of the corporation continued to have social, economic, and political significance.²⁹ The idea of civic freedom based on company membership drew in

²⁶ Hilda L. Smith, *All Men and Both Sexes: Gender, Politics, and the False Universal in England, 1640–1832* (University Park, PA, 2002), chap. 2.

²⁷ Smith, “*Grossly Material Things*’.

²⁸ Alfred Plummer, *The London Weavers’ Company, 1600–1970* (London, 1972), 61–4.

²⁹ Mark Knights, “A City Revolution: The Remodelling of the London Livery Companies in the 1680s,” *English Historical Review* 112, no. 449 (November 1997): 1141–1178, and Berlin, “Guilds in Decline?”

part on the marginalisation and exclusion of women, whilst crafts and trades drew on women's labor in companies, households, and shops.

The metropolitan apprenticeship market was so large that preprinted forms had been in use since at least the early seventeenth century, when the right to print indentures “with spaces to be filled vp as the prentises are bound” was granted repeatedly to Humfrey Lownes, later warden and master of the Stationers' Company.³⁰ By 1619 Lownes and his fellow master printers were being accused of making a fortune from such lucrative forms. Their single-side printing was straightforward and profitable; “little jobs” like this, Peter Stallybrass argues, were at the heart of the print revolution.³¹ Thousands of indentures were used in London every year. Like the first surviving printed texts, indulgences, indentures were produced in multiples, divided, and completed; the printing was just the beginning of a journey of engagement between people, writing, and print. Forms like these, made with gaps for completion by the user, were a key part of the emergent bureaucracy of early modern England, facilitating standardisation for commerce and government.³² James Raven has described how the printed form came to shape the Enlightenment worlds of both business and

³⁰ *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640*, ed. E. Arber, 5 vols (London, 1875–94), 3:276.

³¹ Peter Stallybrass, “‘Little Jobs’: Broadsides and the Printing Revolution,” in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies After Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Amherst, 2007), 315–41, at 328.

³² For more on forms, see Maurice Rickards, *The Encyclopedia of Ephemeria: A Guide to the Fragmentary Documents of Everyday Life for the Collector, Curator, and Historian* (Hove, 2000), 150.

family, recasting the everyday through a “raft of printed and blank paper.”³³ Printed forms prescribed roles and relationships.

Whilst print forms like indentures, embellished with official coats of arms and seals, embodied some authority, it was writing that filled out their meaning. Names, places and dates were left to be completed. Most female apprentices in this period signed their forms; print culture and writing was part of their world, and business documentation was rapidly becoming so. One indenture prescribed that a girl be allowed an hour a day to write.³⁴ Indentures were instruments of commerce and their completion, signature, and sealing enrolled their participants into what was still the key body of civic membership: the company. This process made people active participants in institutional record keeping. The interaction between print and writing was increasingly an established part of city life.³⁵ Other London institutions also used forms, reaching a wider social range; applicants to Christ’s Hospital, for example, required the completion of a document in which the details of deprivation were recorded for the judgement of the governors. Margaret Hunt’s work on seamen and powers of attorney shows sailors’ wives and other women making an active economic intervention into the late seventeenth-century state. The documents signed over to

³³ James Raven, “‘Print Culture’ and the Perils of Practice,” in *The Perils of Print Culture: Book, Print and Publishing History in Theory and Practice*, ed. Eve Patten and Jason McElligott (London, 2014), 218–37.

³⁴ Mary Bignell, COL/CHD/FR/02/111/8, LMA.

³⁵ See, for example, the plague broadsides with gaps for the latest figures in Mark S. R. Jenner, “Plague on a Page: Lord Have Mercy Upon Us in Early Modern London,” *The Seventeenth Century* 27, no. 3 (September 2012): 255–86.

them were key to the dockside economy as well as to keeping unpaid men on board.³⁶ This developing bureaucracy, then, was part of the apparatus of gender; it necessarily engaged with the question of women's inclusion in civic bodies and duties.

Women's indentures were both ordinary and special. Of 105 indentures of women given the freedom after apprenticeship between 1680 and 1700, only 1 used the standard male-specific form without alteration. The rest had indentures that were changed, in various ways, to suit them. There are subtle differences between all these forms. Some incorporated company coats of arms and had the company name printed; others were more generic, with just the City arms and a company name written in. The printed ones used black-letter type, capitals and italics to mark out their key terms, but not all in the same places, so they look generically similar but not, on closer scrutiny, identical. They were so small—their print crammed onto a uniform six and a half inches by five inches—that altering “master” into “mistris” by pen was delicate work. Almost all were printed on parchment rather than paper. Parchment registered their significance; created as solid, legal documents, they had to last not only the length of the bond, but much longer. If the apprentice proceeded to take the freedom of the city their copy of the indenture was passed on to the Chamberlain, where it was spiked, filed, and kept. Even if not, indentures were likely to be retained with care as proof of

³⁶ Margaret Hunt, “The Sailor's Wife, War Finance, and Coverture in Late Seventeenth-Century London,” in *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*, ed. Tim Stretton and K. J. Kesselring (Montreal, 2014), 139–162, and “Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries,” in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge, 2004), 29–47. Naomi Tadmor's work in progress on pauper settlement forms in the eighteenth century is certain to be relevant here, too.

training and relationship to a company. Indeed, these documents bear the traces of their circulation around the household, before their return to the archive, each with its own folds and stains. Petitioners for the freedom by patrimony sometimes brought with them the indentures of their own fathers. At the other end of the spectrum, there are occasional reports of enraged apprentices tearing up their indentures.³⁷ The life of the form mattered.

Parchment, used for permanence, also offered the ability to change forms to suit their users. Only on parchment could the printed word “master” be easily changed to “mistris.” Vellum does not absorb ink in the way rag paper does, and it is far more resistant to rubbing. The result was changeable text on a long-lasting object (paper could be said to provide the opposite, with the ink actively corroding the surface). The combination of print and parchment, particular to London, provided the potential to alter indentures for girls legibly and without impossible mess. All indentures left gaps for names, places, and dates, but aside from filling those in, boys’ indentures were not altered; girls’ indentures usually were.

Indentures were valuable objects; they needed to be right, not only for legal reasons, but also because of their representative power, as a symbol of an investment. Perhaps, for girls, these documents were especially powerful, because they were so unusual; they offered a tie to a city company that was otherwise hard to establish. A contract inscribed with the name of a woman was a rare thing. It was first a promise, and later a proof, of occupational training, also rare for a woman. It might be an aspirational object, even an object of fashion. The large, beautifully engraved script indentures used by the Mercers’ Company were twice the size of an ordinary form, with a detailed image of the Mercers’ Maiden who featured on the coat of arms and was personified in the company pageant; these were carefully altered for

³⁷ Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560–1640* (Oxford, 1996), 301.

apprentices like Lucy Maes (figure 3).³⁸ Here, the handwritten style that sometimes indicated a dubious contract was formalised into something much more solid.

<insert figure 3 here> Figure 3 Caption: Figure 3: Indenture of Lucy Maes to John Spillett, 1683. COL/CHD/FR/02/40/83, London Metropolitan Archives.

A few apprentices were given a different form entirely—one printed specifically for girls. The most specialist of these named the company, used its coat of arms, and specified the female sex for both apprentice and mistress. Others were generic company forms, with the Corporation arms. Clearly, forms printed for girls were desirable, even to the extent of printing them for, in some cases, only one or two girls a year. Locating indentures from the same print run makes it possible to see how this work was done. Two Drapers' Company indentures were clearly printed in the same batch or at least from the same printer's forme; only the pronouns have been altered between the two. Richard Lavington was apprenticed to Charles Marshall in 1690. Four years later another copy of the same document, its type altered only to make a master into a mistress and a male apprentice into a female, was used to indenture Mary Toft to Elizabeth Fazackerley, a single woman who had just gained the freedom of the Drapers' Company by patrimony (figures 4, 5). The four-year gap suggests that such batches of indentures had a long life; perhaps the forms for girls lay waiting in Drapers' Hall longer than the rest, for Mary Toft was only the eighth female apprentice indentured there since 1690. The replacement of "he" with "she" was easily done by moving two letters in the print shop, but someone had to request it.

³⁸ Anne F. Sutton, *I Sing of a Maiden: The Story of the Maiden of the Mercers' Company* (London, 1998).

<insert figure 4 here> Figure 4 Caption: Figure 4: Indenture of Mary Toft to Elizabeth Fazerkerley, 1694. COL/CHD/FR/02/298/545, London Metropolitan Archives.

<insert figure 5 here> Figure 5 Caption: Figure 5: Indenture of Richard Lavington to Charles Marshall, 1690. COL/CHD/FR/02/118/51, London Metropolitan Archives.

Few companies, though, went so far as to do this. There are only six female-specific forms out of 105 indentures of women who took the freedom. Forms for girls were used by the Drapers, Fruiterers, Leathersellers, and Merchant Taylors companies, but most featured a generic city coat of arms, suggesting they had not been printed specially for girls in that company. Only the Merchant Taylors and the Drapers, two of the leading companies, seem to have purchased and provided forms that were both company-specific and female-specific. The absence of indentures from the pre-Fire period makes it impossible to know when this practice began; the first surviving indenture printed for a girl is from 1679. It seems possible, though, that the practice of providing indentures that were either made for girls or were gender-neutral was one of the conditions that encouraged, within firm limits, the apprenticeship of girls and their access to the freedom of the City.

Mistresses binding apprentices in their own names, usually widows, were better provided for with stationery. Most used printed forms, and only about half of them had to alter them, because there were pre-printed forms to suit their circumstances. There was a long and well-established history of widows as mistresses, able to practice and bind apprentices into their deceased husband's trade. But there were no more women taking on apprentices than becoming them; in a company like the Drapers, only one or two forms for mistresses were likely to be needed a year. They were more readily available, it seems, because widowed mistresses played an established role in companies. Widows in textile trades could get pre-printed indentures of their own. Mary Symwell's indenture for her male apprentice in

1682 described her in print as “widow, late wife of . . . , citizen and feltmaker.”³⁹ Spinsters taking apprentices in their own right, rather than as widows, did not merit special forms.

At the other end of the spectrum, a good many girls were apprenticed without print at all. Manuscript indentures were the norm for guild apprenticeships outside London, and for parish or pauper apprenticeships in the city. They were often used by girls in London companies, too; in the later seventeenth century about half the girls’ indentures are in manuscript form, and almost none of the boys’. Written individually, they usually replicated most or all of the standard words of print indentures, but allowed for some variation to suit apprentice and mistress. The clerk who drew up Elizabeth Hardy’s made it more real by drawing in the three leopards with shuttles in their mouths from the Weavers’ coat of arms (figure 6). It is hard to tell who decided what form to use; although there were strictures against having indentures made at scriveners’ instead of at the hall, and some of these documents are very scrappy, they were all still accepted as proof of apprenticeship.⁴⁰ Sometimes it was probably pure chance. In the Skinners’ Company James Allen and his wife used a print indenture for Mary Waters in 1691, and a manuscript one for Elizabeth Fowke five years later; both became free of the city. By contrast, in the Weavers’ Richard and Huldah Lyford used print forms for boys and manuscript for girls, and the flexibility of the handwritten version made it possible for Huldah Lyford to be recorded, as Sarah Bearstow was, as a mistress alongside her husband. Ann Howard had lost her own copy of the indenture, and had to return to Huldah ten years later to get her copy; she brought it to the Chamberlain with a letter from her old mistress testifying that she had indeed been apprenticed and served her full time. The overlap between manuscript and print for girls’ indentures might blur the line between company apprenticeships with high premiums, the

³⁹ COL/CHD/FR/02/24/11, LMA.

⁴⁰ Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers’ Company: A History, 1403–1959* (Stanford, 1977), 81.

parish apprenticeships that were used for pauper children, and the contracts of domestic service. Manuscript was not necessarily less symbolic or less powerful than print, but it was less uniform, it suggested unorthodoxy, and manuscript forms did not (usually) include the company coat of arms.

<insert figure 6 here> Figure 6 caption: Figure 6: Indenture of Elizabeth Hardy to William and Sarah Bearstow, 1681. COL/CHD/FR/02/14/59, London Metropolitan Archives.

The final, and perhaps most suggestive, possibility in the repertoire of apprenticeship stationery was the form that, like that of Mary Bradley in figure 7, specified neither sex, so that “she” or “he” could be inserted as appropriate. Printed, presumably, for companies who wanted to cover all possible options, these forms were almost always used for girls rather than boys. They are present in the earliest surviving indentures, from the 1670s, but were used increasingly often in the eighteenth century. Nearly half of all girls’ indentures continued to be ones originally printed for boys and altered, but in the first half of the eighteenth century most of the rest were forms printed with gaps instead of gendered pronouns, which required no alteration to suit a girl. Rather, they required everyone’s sex to be filled in—as if female apprentices were much likelier than, in fact, they were. In the later seventeenth century, nearly half the female apprentices whose indentures survive were bound with a variety of individual manuscript indentures; table 1 shows the proportions of different types of forms in use at this point.

<insert figure 7 here> Figure 7 Caption: Figure 7: Indenture of Mary Bradley to William Withers, 1676. COL/CHD/FR/02/17/5, London Metropolitan Archives.

<insert table 1 here> Table 1 Caption: Table 1: Girls’ indentures in Freedom files 1667–1699

By the early eighteenth century, manuscript forms had fallen out of use, and by the 1750s female apprentices were all using printed documents rather than manuscript ones. Perhaps these gender-neutral forms, which create the impression that female apprentices were much more common than they were in practice, were aspirational—aimed at genteel girls and their families. Between the 1670s and the 1770s, while overall numbers of apprentices were in decline, the proportion of girls formally recorded as apprentices varied between 1% and 2% of the total. Forms for girls continued to be printed, but most often girls were indentured on gender-neutral forms, or on boys' forms with adaptations. The potential suggested by forms with no sex was balanced by a disinclination to expand very far into female-specific forms. This was an era of many printed forms, when printers regularly had to choose how to cater for female subjects. Plantation indentures for emigrants from London followed a very similar model, but almost all were printed with gaps for the sex, so that both girls and boys used them. Forms for admissions for Christ's Hospital likewise left open the possibility for a female or male presenting parent. Other forms were rigidly male and were altered for the women who used them: certificates of goods presented by prisoners for debt, for example, had to be adapted by pen to fit women in the same way as indentures were.⁴¹ Expectations and ideologies were surely at least as important as practicality in determining how to draw up a form.

Whose initiatives were represented in these changes? Did company officials, anticipating girls asking for contracts and expecting proper paperwork, send messengers and notes with demands for particular kinds of indentures—perhaps 50 ordinary and 5 with blanks? Did companies encourage girls into apprenticeships by offering proper appropriate

⁴¹ MJ/SD/003/09D, 14C, LMA. My thanks to Molly Corlett for alerting me to these examples.

documentation, rather than scratching out “he” on an existing form? Or did printers, well aware of the commercial value of work on forms, provide a batch with a variety that would make companies appreciate them more, and return again another year? Both forms for girls and blank forms, suggesting an apprentice could be either sex, carried a message of inclusion in a culture that was vigilant about restricting women’s participation. Looking at the writing on forms in more detail will illuminate how those two dynamics worked in practice.

Insertions and Modifications

Indentures are apt to withhold all the kinds of detail historians of work and society hope for. But the modifications, insertions, and deletions that were added to forms for women can be surprisingly revealing, not just about working households, but about the interaction between bureaucracy and gender. Altered forms record the pressures and aspirations of a changing system, and they might themselves have been a catalyst for change.

Sometimes, the flexibility of women’s forms left room for a brief account of the actual skill a girl was apprenticed to learn. Everard Levett, a barber surgeon, took on Margaret Kirkham, a clerk’s daughter from Gloucestershire, in 1688. Margaret was apprenticed with a standard, male indenture corrected to fit her, with her master named as Everard although she would have been trained by his wife Elizabeth. By the time Mary Farewell, a London gentleman’s daughter, joined the household in 1692, Everard had died and the widowed Elizabeth was making indentures in her own name; she is described on the form as “citizen and barber surgeon,” and it is altered both for a female apprentice and for a mistress, with “Master” turned by hand into “Misteris.” Margaret Kirkham must have been still there, for she completed her apprenticeship and took the freedom in 1695 or 1696. A few months later, in June of 1696, Margaret Kirkham signed up an apprentice of her own, Ann Evans, daughter of a Welsh gentleman. As she was single and free, she did so in her own

name. She was a member of the Barber-Surgeons, but the indenture used this time specified her trade as well: “the Art or Mistery of a Milliner.” Engraved company indentures often left gaps that enabled a different trade to be named. Millinery was common, but other trades were mentioned as well, and in these cases the movement of daughters of one trade into another of their own is visible. Mary Baker, an Essex tailor’s daughter, was apprenticed to a cooper and his wife in 1679 to learn “the art of making children’s coats.” Anne Thurland, daughter of a London surgeon, was apprenticed to Anne Harding, a widow in the Shipwrights’ Company, to learn “the Art Mistery or Occupation of a Periwig Maker.” Isabella Dixon, another tailor’s daughter, was to learn the work of a pastry cook from a needlemaker and his wife. And Mary Archer, a London merchant taylor’s daughter, was apprenticed in 1695 to learn the trade of “a haberdasher of small wares” from Elizabeth Whittell, a merchant taylor’s widow.⁴²

Women’s indentures usually used the standard behavioural clauses of apprenticeship indentures. One, though, appeared to be problematic: the clause that forbade apprentices from marrying whilst in service. Those drawing up indentures for girls sometimes crossed it out, as with Mary Toft’s, or erased it with a decorative line. Other indentures used by women, particularly those engraved with no sex specified, left a gap where the clause could be inserted, but wasn’t. Manuscript indentures for girls tended to leave the whole fornication and marriage clause out completely. Service had always precluded marriage for both women and men, because it was residential, and celibacy was an essential aspect of medieval apprenticeship and continued to be so in the early modern period, though male apprentices were notorious clients of London brothels. The contract of apprenticeship was fundamentally incompatible with marriage, for both men and women. For a woman, marrying whilst in

⁴² Kirkham, COL/CHD/FR/02/103/49, LMA; Evans, COL/CHD/FR/02/187/42, LMA; Baker, COL/CHD/FR/02/195/9, LMA; Thurland, COL/CHD/FR/02/195/126, LMA; Dixon, COL/CHD/FR/02/184/35, LMA; Archer, COL/CHD/FR/02/271/102, LMA.

service added a further complication, because it would put her under two masters. “Our law freeth a maidservant when she is married from her master’s covenant,” noted William Gouge in 1622.⁴³ This was an abiding concern. The London school board considered a similar question in 1881, concerned that when female pupil teachers married, their indentures would be invalidated; they concluded that in fact, the husband would provide another guarantor, sharing the role of employer of the indentured woman. Indentures, notes Dina Copelman, “were a way of symbolising patriarchal power.”⁴⁴ Jennifer Morgan’s work on new world slavery suggests another dimension for the prohibition on marriage in service. Colonial authorities argued that a woman who married under indenture had two masters, and moved to punish indentured women who became pregnant, and also to indenture their children. The marriage ban thus became a gateway to the exploitation of indentured and enslaved women’s “dual labors,” reproductive and manual.⁴⁵

The deletions in these seventeenth-century indentures suggest that when women were apprenticed, some preferred *not* to prohibit them from contracting matrimony. At least twenty of a hundred women’s indentures either delete the clause forbidding matrimony, or leave it out. In theory, although unlikely in practice, the resultant contracts would mean a girl could marry and continue in apprenticeship. More likely is that removing the matrimony clause encouraged girls and their parents to see apprenticeship as no obstacle to future marriage. Allowing apprenticeship to impede marriage must have seemed counter-intuitive for girls in a way it was not for boys. A chance reference in the diary of a London barrister, John

⁴³ William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises* (London, 1622), 664.

⁴⁴ Dina Copelman, *London’s Women Teachers: Gender, Class and Feminism, 1870–1930* (London, 2013), 129–30.

⁴⁵ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2011), 76.

Manningham, may shed some light on the matter. After a conversation with his cousin, a London merchant, Manningham noted that when male apprentices married they had to complete their contracts and also lost their right to the freedom, but a “woman prentice” only lost the freedom.⁴⁶ Perhaps the deletions of the marriage clause simply reflected what was already customary practice, rather than altering it, suggesting that it was well known that the matrimony clause did not have the same binding power on girls as on boys. This conversation, recorded alongside other notes on London customs, also suggests that the dilemma of female apprentices and marriage was an interesting one to lawyers and merchants. The evidence on outcomes for female apprentices is so slender—partly because of incomplete marriage registers and high mobility—that it is not feasible to estimate how many married midcontract. The middling and gentle backgrounds of these girls meant that an early marriage was more likely than it would have been for the male apprentices of an earlier period. Yet of the eight girls whose broken contracts were disputed in the Mayor’s Court, only one left to marry—another left London for her hometown, and another went into partnership without being free. But the discussion and removal of the matrimony clause suggests that companies, families, and apprentices saw the relationship between indentures and marriage as problematic, and that in many cases families were keen to avoid apprenticeships getting in the way of potential good marriages.

One indenture deleted not the marriage clause, but the preceding one forbidding fornication, effectively creating a contract which allowed fornication but not marriage—an unlikely position given the intensive concern about both apprentices’ and women’s sexual behaviour. It may be a mistake, or the result of a concern that any reference to fornication

⁴⁶ *Diary of John Manningham: Of the Middle Temple, and of Bradbourne, Kent, Barrister-at-Law, 1602–1693*, ed. John Bruce (London, 1868), 12. I owe this reference to Tim Reinke-Williams.

was inappropriate in a girl's indenture. But it is also part of a long, if slender, history of variable regulation of fornication for male and female apprentices. Medieval indentures sometimes made different rules about fornication for men and women, imposing stricter penalties on girls. In the late fifteenth century men were ordered not to fornicate in their master's house, while women were not to do so anywhere at all.⁴⁷ One indenture from early seventeenth-century Norwich specifies that a woman, if caught fornicating, is "to double the term of her service."⁴⁸

The fornication and matrimony deletions recall some much earlier discussions about girls' apprenticeships. A hundred years earlier, it was questionable whether girls could be apprenticed at all. The Drapers' Company Memorandum Book records a discussion in 1570 at a meeting of the wardens of the company. Before they went into dinner, "a question was raised"

whether a mayden servant willing to be bounde apprentice to a master and mistres
for terme of yeres might not be presented in our hall and also inrolled in the chamber
of London as other apprentices are and thereby to enjoye also the fredom of the
Cytie?

It was answered by William Drummer, an experienced warden: he said yes, and explained that

they have precedents [thereof] in the Chamber of London for more than a [100]
yeres past and that the self same othe wch ys mynistered to all other apprentices that
are made free ys also ministered to them and further that the indentures ought also to

⁴⁷ Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, c.1270–c.1540* (Manchester, 2003), 83.

⁴⁸ AB1 171X1 (Helen Dallyson, 1624), Norwich Record Office.

be made in suche manner and forme as they are for other apprentices in this Cytie
(with the clause *matrimonium ne contrahet neque sponsabit*).⁴⁹

The question arose because Brian Calverley had brought a girl to be apprenticed to himself and his wife. The master and wardens had refused “for that they had not seen the like before.”⁵⁰ Despite the precedent, this unnamed girl seems not to have been registered as a apprentice, although Calverley took a number of boys on in the 1570s. Drummer’s answer deals firmly not only with the question of female apprenticeship, but the precise form of indentures, and also makes clear that the matrimony clause was likely to come in question. Matters of contract were clearly central, and the problematic relationship between employment and marriage contract likewise. In the event the first recorded female apprentice at the Drapers’ Company was in 1632, and it was such a surprise that the scribe recorded her first as “filius” (son) before altering it to “filia” (daughter).⁵¹ This correction presages the way printed indentures were altered.

Because girls were more likely to have manuscript and altered indentures, they were more likely to have clauses that varied the standard formula, and fleshed out what being an apprentice involved. Ann Baker’s handwritten indenture, made in 1679 and preserved until she applied for her freedom unusually late in 1703, also elaborates the details of the behaviour expected of her. Traditionally, apprenticeship indentures forbid a long list of classic urban wastes of time and money: haunting alehouses, going to plays, or playing cards or dice. They add, “in all things as a faithful apprentice behave himself

⁴⁹ “Not to contract matrimony nor espouse herself” (thanks to Daniel Hadas here).

⁵⁰ Minute Book 8 f. 97, 14 March 1569/70, Drapers’ Company Archive, and cited in Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 2002), 36.

⁵¹ FB 3, 22 November 1634, Drapers’ Company Archive.

towards his master.” Hers is slightly different: it requires her to “gently use bear and behave herself toward her master mistress and all theirs.” It also refers to behaving “as a faithful servant and apprentice.” Both these small changes are suggestive: “servant and apprentice” reflects a longstanding understanding of apprenticeship as, like domestic service, a variety of civic and domestic subordination, but the line between domestic service and apprenticeship could be a point of stress for apprentices, especially girls. “Gentle bearing” is a gendered addition, not used in relation to male apprentices, if only because they were unlikely to be apprenticed using a handwritten contract.⁵² Similarly, Lidia Callendrine’s apprenticeship to her sister, Rachell Callendrine, in the Scriveners’ Company included the clause that she should “lovingly and meekly bear and behave herself” to her mistress “and all hers.” A manuscript document, this one also looks prewritten. These modified, civility-focused behavioural clauses were not necessarily written specifically for women, as some of these manuscript forms were prewritten and altered to fit girls and mistresses; but they were more likely to be used by them. Forms between sisters, as in the case of the Callendrines, were not necessarily fictive, a formal cloak for an informal arrangement; other evidence suggests that contractual service relationships were not inconsistent with family bonds.⁵³

Alterations like these suggest a distinction between the relative rigidity of pre-printed forms, suitable for male apprentices, and the flexibility of the manuscript indentures that nearly a third of girls used before 1700. Yet, as the debate on Eisenstein’s

⁵² The “bearing” of female apprentices is discussed in Laura Gowing, “‘The Manner of Submission’: Gender and Demeanour in Seventeenth-Century London,” *Cultural and Social History* 10, no. 1 (March 2013): 25–45.

⁵³ COL/CHD/FR/02 137/13, LMA. Paulina Pepys’s service to her brother Samuel offers one example here.

print revolution has shown, this was not a stable or reliable distinction.⁵⁴ Manuscript was also quite rigid, reproducing set texts, and pre-printed forms were clearly treated as changeable objects. Rather, the interaction between writing and print that was characteristic of this era, and that was coming to be part of people's experience of governance, was peculiarly suited to the kinds of adaptations made to fit girls and women into a document and an institution designed around male occupations and lifecycle. In addition, the transient qualities of print on parchment made it especially useful for creating permanent, yet changeable, forms to bind girls.

The Life of the Form

The binding of an apprentice was a moment of importance and ceremony. It was likely to be preceded by a series of visits and negotiations, and for girls these raised issues around their work, period of apprenticeship, eligibility for freedom, and of course the premiums. Little evidence survives of these discussions, except when they went wrong. Some glimpses of the process can be seen in cases initiated at the London Mayor's Court when broken contracts led to disputes over premiums. In one such case Mary Huetson, a haberdasher's wife, explained that she had been "instrumental in the placing" of Dorothy Stable to learn seamstry in a goldsmith's household; she had known Dorothy's gentry family, who lived in Pontefract, Yorkshire, since her birth.⁵⁵ Hester Hudson's family, who sued for the return of her premium in 1654, had witnesses who described how her brother, her older sister and another woman visited her master and mistress several times to discuss her apprenticeship before she was eventually indentured

⁵⁴ Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, 1980).

⁵⁵ CLA/024/05/448, LMA.

in the presence of her brother.⁵⁶ When Christian Hutchins, the niece of a prominent clothworker, was bound to a couple in the Barber Surgeons Company, they apparently gave a promise many families must have pressed for: that she would not have to do housework or “drudgery,” but would focus entirely on sewing and learning the trade. Like many apprentices, her father was dead, but her mother, now remarried to a London gentleman, was there when she was indentured. Christian Hutchins, who was apprenticed at only 10, was unusually young, but others started at 12 and 14. Even if their service had lasted the full seven years, these girls would have been well under twenty-four at the end of it and so technically too young to be granted the freedom of company or city. (The same was often true of male apprentices; the institution was increasingly becoming one of adolescence.)⁵⁷ As it was, Christian left at 15, complaining her hands were ruined for sewing by the housework she had had to do. Fortunately, alongside her two unmarried sisters, Christian inherited a share of her uncle’s estate six years later.⁵⁸

A number of these cases suggest some tinkering with the length of time for which girls were apprenticed. The standard length of an apprenticeship was seven years; although many indentures left a blank for the length, it was rarely used to vary this. But sometimes it was different for girls. Hester Hudson, according to her family, was bound for four years only. Katherine Venner, who left her haberdasher master and mistress in 1662 after four years of apprenticeship, brought witnesses to claim that her contract was for only five years: her family had paid more for the advantage of fewer years in service.

⁵⁶ CLA/024/05/72, LMA.

⁵⁷ Patrick Wallis, Clifford Webb, and Chris Minns, “Leaving Home and Entering Service: The Age of Apprenticeship in Early Modern London,” *Continuity and Change* 25, no. 3 (August 2010): 377–404.

⁵⁸ CLA/024/05/318, LMA; TNA, Prob/11/36, Will of Robert Hitchins.

Her brother and her employers argued over how long she had been bound for, and in the ensuing litigation, Katherine's witnesses testified that "it is usuall with persons keeping shopps in the Royall exchange London to take maiden apprentices for noe longer time then 5 yeares."⁵⁹ These shorter contracts, along with the large numbers of girls not completing their contracts or taking the freedom, suggest that the outcome of apprenticeship envisaged for many was training in a business household, rather than independent work at the end of it. Other evidence is more equivocal, and suggests that at least some families anticipated their daughters becoming free even after a short apprenticeship. Dorothy Stable and her father claimed that her master and mistress had supplemented her indenture with a separate covenant guaranteeing that she should only complete five years of a seven year term, after which she would be free to trade independently.⁶⁰ Such an agreement directly contravened the customary rules that mandated a minimum of seven years apprenticeship. Evidently female apprentices, their family, and their employers understood themselves to be able to negotiate with city custom. By contrast, girls also sometimes took up the freedom of the city many years after they had completed their apprenticeship, presumably when the potential or the need for doing business appeared.

The indentures themselves had a long life. In the motley collection of petitions to London's Court of Aldermen, pleas about apprenticeship are frequent, and some include the original indentures. Some of these cases make clear why the right indentures mattered so much: women's entrance to the freedom was hard-fought. The length of apprenticeship was a bone of contention here as well. Patience Lee petitioned to the aldermen that she had served her mistress, a widow in the Pewterers' Company, for the

⁵⁹ Testimony of Francis Hunlok, CLA/024/05/131, LMA.

⁶⁰ CLA/024/05/448, LMA.

five years she was bound for, but at the end she found she could not be made free “for that she was bound but for five yeares (Of which your Petitioner was wholly ignorant at the time of her binding) Which will be your Petitioners Utter Ruin if not Relieved by this honorable Court.” The chancellor had the petition endorsed: “her Mistresse might and ought to have bound her for seven years Which I conceive was wholly the neglect and default of her said Mistresse, and ought not to be prejudiciall to the Petitioner,” and he granted her the freedom by redemption on payment of a fee. Another woman, Mary German, petitioned that she had served seven years to a haberdasher, but that her indentures were “foreign” (made by a scrivener, or outside the city), preventing her from claiming freedom through servitude. Cases like this demonstrate the importance of the archive both to individual women, and in the creation of civic identity. Despite the twenty-six years that had elapsed since Mary German’s apprenticeship, the aldermen sent officers to examine her master and mistress and established “the reason she was bound by such indentures was because she was a Gentlemans daughter and as her friends then said should never want freedom. But since being much reduced would follow the imploy of a symstresse within this City.” She asked, successfully, to be admitted to the freedom by means of a redemption at reduced fees.⁶¹ German’s description of her imperfect indentures supports the evidence, from shortened or unfinished apprenticeships, that apprenticeship often served for women as training in skills that might be useful in future life or in marriage, rather than a route towards freedom and independent trading.

⁶¹ COL/CA/05/01/0004, 1693, LMA. On these petitions, see also Hilda L. Smith, “‘Free and Willing to Remit’: Women’s Petitions to the Court of Aldermen, 1670–1750,” in *Worth and Repute: Valuing Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Essays in Honour of Barbara Todd*, ed. Kim Kippen and Lori Woods (Toronto, 2011), 279–309.

Women's pleas of ignorance of "the custom of this honourable city" were at least sometimes successful; the Court of Aldermen was inclined to clemency.⁶² This uncertainty, though, was not typical. Like the rural women who deposed about customary rights, women often expressed their understanding of London's customs with authority. Rural women saw themselves as expert in the customs of markets, tithes of milk and cheese, or common land; London women (many of whom had, of course, been country girls) were familiar with the custom of feme sole trader which enabled married women to buy, sell, and make contracts independently of their husbands, and with the restrictions and benefits of the freedom.⁶³

Indentured apprenticeship manifestly drew on different rules for women than for men, and the consequences of marriage were perhaps the most inequitable. The custom of London followed the lead of the common law in prioritising coverture; even women who had served apprenticeships or were entitled to patrimonies lost the right to freedom if they married an unfree man. This takes us back to the question the Drapers faced with the surprising female apprentice in the sixteenth century: how could the marriage contract and the work contract co-exist? In the late seventeenth century, women's petitions to the Chamberlain repeatedly raised and challenged their exclusion from the privileges of company membership, and the aldermen, whilst upholding the minutiae of customary practice, found themselves making loopholes to let women in on the basis of the contracts they had made in good faith. This practice also exposes the way indentures

⁶² COL/CA/05/02/004, Nowlin, LMA.

⁶³ Nicola Whyte, "Custodians of Memory: Women and Custom in Rural England," *Cultural and Social History* 8, no. 2 (June 2011): 153–73; Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013), 295–315.

functioned as documents to be archived and consulted, like parish registers, as well as contracts that bound. The corpus thus created did married women a disservice because of the convention, still less common in Europe than in England, of changing their names. Once married, both ex-apprentices and daughters of freemen entitled to patrimonies did not have obvious ties to the documents that recorded their rights. It is perhaps for this reason that women's petitions often described marriage as "changing her name," an intriguing formulation that makes it sound as if it is the change of name, more than a fundamental change in status, that made a married woman ineligible for the freedom. Susanna Kerby, daughter and widow of freemen, petitioned to request admission via patrimony in these words: "your Petitioner being desirous of her freedom is informed she cannot obtaine it by her said Father's Coppy (tho' admitted in the said Company of Haberdashers) for that she has changed her name by Marriage."⁶⁴ The "copy" was her father's indenture; in the bureaucracy of the company, a seemingly prosaic change could have long-lasting results.

The question of forms continues to matter to the politics of inclusion. In 1987 Teresa de Lauretis's identification of "technologies of gender" pinpointed the moment a woman ticks the F box on an application form as the official entrance into the sex-gender system: "while we thought that we were marking the *F* on the form, in fact the *F* was marking itself on us. To mark *M* instead of *F* would be like cheating or... like erasing ourselves from the world."⁶⁵ The Royal Historical Society's recent report on gender equality recommends that history departments remember that male/female categories do

⁶⁴ COL/CA/05/02/004, LMA.

⁶⁵ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, 1987), 11.

not cover the spectrum of gender, and suggests leaving room for self-identification.⁶⁶ In seventeenth-century forms, this process of interpellation and self-identification worked in a fashion particular to material and economic circumstance. Parchment and ink made forms changeable, so that women signing them were at once excluded by print and included by pen. Later printed forms on paper, in other institutional contexts, were harder to alter; online forms with drop-down fields for personal information such as gender, marital status, sexuality, or ethnicity, can be still more so. Print on parchment offered a rare capacity to change exclusion to inclusion. The changes in guilds' roles and the investment of middling families in apprenticeships for girls encouraged companies and printers to create forms more suited for girls—not just forms that were distinctively female, but also, and increasingly, forms in which gender did not appear to matter. These formally incorporated young men and women into the institution of the company without apparent distinction. The variety of forms with which young women were bound into apprenticeships and the creativity with which those forms were adapted show both companies and families endeavouring to make documentation and custom fit the circumstances of women's training and work. At the same time, the conventions of coverture masked the role of married women as mistresses and circumscribed the potential for women to make use of the freedom they had earned.⁶⁷

This balance of opportunity and restriction reflects what we know of the gender politics of late seventeenth-century London, particularly in relation to women of the middling sort. Opportunities for urban single women to trade and invest were expanding in London as elsewhere, and Amy Erickson has argued that their activity helped

⁶⁶ *Gender Equality and Historians in UK Higher Education* (Royal Historical Society report, January 2015), 7.

⁶⁷ *Lex Londinensis, Or, The City Law* (London, 1680), 48.

stimulate early capitalism in England.⁶⁸ Simultaneously the development of spheres of public, political sociability helped define civic participation and political discussion as gendered male. The invention of the “freeborn Englishman” and the refinement of electoral politics did not alter the basis of political participation, but they did mark politics more clearly as masculine, formalising the exclusion of women from most voting opportunities.⁶⁹ Perhaps these developments also underlie the care in specifying when the subject of a contract was a “she,” so that it could never otherwise be mistaken. What we are seeing in indentures, equity cases, and household listings is an attempt to make the developing technology of documentation fit the shifting norms of gender and work. The forms of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were flexible and surprisingly readily changeable, as well as being adaptable in themselves; if the exclusion of women was part of company ideology, the capacity to practically and visibly include them was convenient and valuable. Sometimes, at least, a female apprentice could expect to find a form to fit her.

As the process of printing became more mechanized, the ease with which a female-specific form could be produced actually decreased. Gender-free forms with gaps to fill in personal details were prevalent in a variety of contexts in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but they seem to have been replaced by forms, which were more specifically male. Preprinted forms whose subjects were designated male were still in use in offices, banks, and government in the twentieth century. The process of having

⁶⁸ Amy Louise Erickson, “Coverture and Capitalism,” *History Workshop Journal* 59 (Spring 2005): 1–16.

⁶⁹ Smith, *All Men and Both Sexes*, 132; Patricia Crawford, “‘The Poorest She’: Women and Citizenship in Early Modern England,” in *The Putney Debates of 1647: The Army, the Levellers and the English State*, ed. Michael Mendle (Cambridge, 2001), 197–217 at 202–5.

to adapt them might be seen as a repetitive inhibition on women's place in a world of work, business, or money. Conversely, gender-neutral indentures may have helped create an imaginative space for women's formal training and company membership. Historians of women's work have generally moved on from the search for a medieval golden age in which women's work was more fairly valued and female skilled apprenticeship probably represents neither decline nor improvement in women's work generally. If anything, it reinforces a sense of the variety of female experience running alongside ideological constraints on the productive labor of both single and married women.⁷⁰ It hardly represented an English parallel to the independent seamstresses' guilds of France, but it might be distantly connected, and the surge in women's participation in the Merchant Tailors of York in the eighteenth century shows another route for the story of women in the later guilds.⁷¹ In the chances apprenticeship offered to women from a fairly recognisable, if unpredictably chosen, cohort, it also forms part of the story—a discontinuous one—of the intersecting formation of class and gender that was told by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall for the period beginning a hundred years later.⁷²

⁷⁰ On the relationships between representation and practices of work, see also Judith M. Bennett, "Misogyny, Popular Culture, and Women's Work," *History Workshop Journal* 31 (Spring 1991): 166–88; Michael Roberts, "Sickles and Scythes: Women's Work and Men's Work at Harvest Time," *History Workshop Journal* 7 (Spring 1979): 3–28, and Merry E. Wiesner, "Guilds, Male Bonding and Women's Work in Early Modern Germany," *Gender & History* 1, no. 2 (August 1989): 125–37.

⁷¹ Smith, "Women's Admission to Guilds."

⁷² Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850*, 2nd ed. (London: 2002).

The nature of indentures highlights, too, their role as contracts. An indenture for apprenticeship was one of the simplest and best-established forms of contract, bridging three realms of subordination and belonging: family, work, and—through the institution of the corporation—politics. For women, it raised a well-rehearsed conflict with the marriage contract: not only could a female apprentice, like a male one, not marry, but a married woman could not bind an apprentice to her. The deletions of the marriage clause suggest an active concern with the relationship between coverture and labour contracts. It was coverture, likewise, that imperilled women's relationship with the social contract, impeding a woman's capacity to make any other kind of agreement.

The balance of exclusion and inclusion that appear in the practices of indenturing women may help us think about how gender worked in the late seventeenth century. Gender categories are both unstable and overdefined, crowded with labels and descriptions. In the seventeenth century, rules about work and gender-specific documentation of workers were part of what Denise Riley characterises as “the excessively described and attributed being of “women.”⁷³ Daryl Hafter's study of women's work in French textile guilds shows businesswomen in Rouen benefitting from the privileges of guild membership through the category of *marchande publique*; in a society of orders, the gender binary was not sufficiently entrenched to guarantee inequity.⁷⁴ Manuscript and print alterations to the preprinted forms that bound apprentices to their masters and mistresses made clear that girls could be contracted,

⁷³ Denise Riley, “*Am I That Name?*”: *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (Basingstoke, 1988), 16.

⁷⁴ Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France* (University Park, PA, 2007), 55–6. *Marchande publique* status was similar to the English feme sole trader, but the links to guilds gave it much greater impact.

trained, and made free like boys, but that a form in the universal male could not bind a girl. They confirmed that marriage and coverture got in the way of girls' apprenticeship and, later, their capacity for freedom, and that women's part in the central political and social institution of urban community was hedged with exclusions. In the flexibility of documentation that parchment forms paradoxically offered, we might see another aspect of the evolving relationship between the category of women and the various forms of urban citizenship. While women were being theoretically defined as not citizens, guilds and printers were busily facilitating the membership of those with resources in the world of business. The insistence on the limits imposed by coverture, characteristic of England, made the distinction between married and single women practically a gender category in itself. Phil Withington has argued that the urban corporations of the seventeenth century featured some of the key constitutive developments of early modernity: the formation of the state, the establishment of the "public sphere", and commercialisation.⁷⁵ Patriarchal politics were pivotal in all those developments. Watching Londoners determining how to place women in companies, balancing exclusion and participation, can help us understand not only how women fitted into the City's institutions, but how the politics of the freedom helped constitute the very category of women.

⁷⁵ Withington, *Politics of Commonwealth*.